The Rise of Extinctionist Thought: From Elon Musk's Claims to Global Movements

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In a recent social media post, tech mogul Elon Musk labeled Vice President Kamala Harris an "extinctionist," sparking a heated debate about environmental policies and human population control. This accusation highlights a growing and controversial ideology known as extinctionist thought, which advocates for drastic measures to address environmental degradation. From the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement's call for the voluntary cessation of human reproduction to philosophers like David Benatar, who argue against procreation on ethical grounds, extinctionist ideas challenge traditional approaches to sustainability. This article explores the historical and modern proponents of extinctionist thought, examining their influence on contemporary environmental movements and the broader implications for society and the planet.

Keywords: Elon Musk, Kamala Harris, extinctionist, environmental degradation, Voluntary Human Extinction Movement, David Benatar, antinatalism, population control, radical environmentalism, Deep Green Resistance, climate change, sustainability, ecological crisis, human extinction, environmental activism.

Introduction

In a recent social media post, tech billionaire Elon Musk stirred controversy by labeling U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris an "extinctionist." Musk's comment came in response to Harris's discussion on "climate anxiety," where she highlighted young people's fears about the future and the environmental implications of starting families in an uncertain climate. Musk's dramatic interpretation of her remarks, suggesting they implied a "de facto holocaust for all of humanity," sparked significant public discourse and drew attention to the broader concept of extinctionist thought (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Definition and Context of Extinctionist Thought

Extinctionist thought encompasses a range of ideologies that advocate for the reduction or cessation of human population growth due to environmental, ethical, or philosophical reasons. Proponents argue that human overpopulation is a primary driver of environmental degradation, climate change, and the depletion of natural resources. By reducing the human population, extinctionists believe it is possible to restore ecological balance and ensure the long-term sustainability of the planet.

This concept is not monolithic but includes various perspectives and motivations. Some, like the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), advocate for the voluntary cessation of human reproduction to allow the Earth's biosphere to recover. Others, like philosopher David Benatar, approach the issue from an antinatalist standpoint, arguing that coming into existence is inherently harmful and that procreation should be avoided for ethical reasons.

Historically, the idea of managing population growth to address environmental concerns gained prominence with works like Paul R. Ehrlich's "The Population Bomb," which warned of the catastrophic consequences of overpopulation. In more recent times, figures like Pentti Linkola and organizations such as the Church of Euthanasia have pushed for more radical measures, reflecting a growing sense of urgency among some environmental activists and thinkers.

Extinctionist thought often intersects with deep ecology, a philosophical and social movement that advocates for the intrinsic value of all living beings and the need to radically change human societies to live in harmony with nature. While

these ideas are contentious and provoke strong reactions, they contribute to ongoing debates about the best ways to address the environmental crises facing the world today.

This article aims to explore the spectrum of extinctionist thought, examining notable figures, movements, and the broader implications of these ideas for environmental policy and human society. By understanding the motivations and arguments behind extinctionist views, we can better appreciate the complexities of the debate over humanity's future and our relationship with the natural world.

Elon Musk's Accusation

Detailed Account of Musk's Social Media Post

On July 27, 2024, Elon Musk posted a controversial comment on his social media platform X (formerly known as Twitter), where he labeled U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris an "extinctionist." This dramatic statement was made in response to a tweet from Senator J.D. Vance, which included a video of Harris discussing the impact of climate change on young people's decisions about starting families. Musk's post read: "Shamala is an extinctionist. The natural extension of her philosophy would be a de facto holocaust for all of humanity!" (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Contextual Background

The context of Musk's accusation stems from a video in which Kamala Harris spoke about the growing phenomenon of "climate anxiety" among young people. In this video, Harris acknowledged that many young individuals are increasingly worried about the future due to climate change. She mentioned that this anxiety has led some to question whether it is responsible or practical to bring children into a world facing severe environmental challenges. Harris's remarks aimed to highlight the psychological and societal impacts of climate change, particularly among the younger generation.

Senator J.D. Vance shared the video clip on social media, expressing skepticism about Harris's message and suggesting that it reflected a broader desire to discourage young people from starting families. Vance's tweet implied that the

stance taken by Harris and similar viewpoints were strange and potentially harmful: "It's almost like these people don't want young people starting families or something. Really weird stuff." (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Reaction and Public Discourse

Musk's accusation against Harris sparked a wave of reactions across social media and various news outlets. Supporters of Musk and critics of Harris amplified the claim, with some agreeing that climate anxiety could deter young people from having children and contributing to population decline. Musk's statement was particularly incendiary, drawing parallels to extreme and provocative imagery by using terms like "holocaust."

Many users on X and other platforms supported Musk's stance, arguing that Harris's acknowledgment of climate anxiety was part of a larger agenda to promote population control and discourage family growth. Comments ranged from calling Harris a "modern-day Thanos," a reference to the Marvel character known for wanting to eliminate half of all life in the universe, to asserting that "The Woke are killing this country" (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

On the other hand, many critics condemned Musk's remarks as hyperbolic and irresponsible. They argued that his language was inflammatory and detracted from serious discussions about climate change and its impacts on mental health and societal choices. Some pointed out that addressing climate anxiety is a legitimate concern and that leaders should not be vilified for acknowledging the emotional and psychological burdens young people face due to environmental issues.

In the broader public discourse, Musk's comment also reignited debates about the ethics of procreation in an era of climate change. This discussion is part of a larger philosophical and environmental conversation about the responsibilities of current generations to future ones and the potential consequences of continued population growth on a finite planet.

The controversy surrounding Musk's accusation against Kamala Harris highlights the polarizing nature of discussions about climate change, population ethics, and the role of public figures in shaping these debates. As extinctionist thought gains attention, it is essential to navigate these conversations with nuance and an

understanding of the complex motivations and implications behind various viewpoints.

Notable Extinctionists and Movements

Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT)

Founded by Les Knight The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) was founded by Les Knight in the early 1990s. Knight, a former school teacher and environmental activist, was motivated by his concerns about overpopulation and its detrimental effects on the environment.

Ideology and Goals: Voluntary Cessation of Human Reproduction VHEMT promotes the idea that humans should voluntarily cease reproducing to gradually reduce the population until humanity is extinct. This, they argue, would allow the Earth's biosphere to recover and flourish without human interference. Knight and his followers believe that human existence inherently leads to environmental degradation and that the best way to preserve the planet is through a peaceful, voluntary extinction (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

David Benatar

Philosopher Known for Antinatalism David Benatar is a prominent South African philosopher and a leading figure in the field of antinatalism, a philosophical stance that argues against procreation.

Key Works and Arguments: "Better Never to Have Been" Benatar's most influential work is "Better Never to Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence," published in 2006. In this book, Benatar argues that coming into existence is always a harm and that it would be better if individuals were never born. He reasons that life inherently involves suffering and that the absence of life is not a deprivation because non-existent beings cannot miss out on the pleasures of life. This position challenges traditional views on procreation and questions the ethical implications of bringing new lives into the world (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Pentti Linkola

Finnish Ecologist Advocating Deep Ecology and Population Reduction Pentti Linkola was a Finnish ecologist, ornithologist, and radical environmentalist known for his extreme views on population reduction and environmental preservation.

Overview of His Radical Views on Environmental Preservation Linkola's philosophy, often classified under deep ecology, posits that human overpopulation is the root cause of environmental destruction. He believed that drastic measures, including authoritarian control and significant population reduction, were necessary to preserve the natural world. Linkola argued that the current trajectory of human civilization was unsustainable and that immediate, radical action was required to prevent ecological collapse. His views have been highly controversial, drawing criticism for their authoritarian and misanthropic elements, but they have also sparked important debates about the lengths to which humanity should go to protect the environment (Meaww) (The Daily Beast) .

Conclusion These figures and movements represent the spectrum of extinctionist thought, from voluntary, peaceful approaches to more radical and controversial ideologies. They all share a common concern for the planet's future and the belief that human population growth poses a significant threat to environmental sustainability. By examining their ideas, we gain insight into the ethical and practical considerations surrounding the debate on human existence and environmental preservation.

Historical and Philosophical Context

Paul R. Ehrlich

Author of "The Population Bomb" Paul R. Ehrlich, an American biologist and professor, is best known for his 1968 book "The Population Bomb." In this seminal work, Ehrlich warned of the dire consequences of overpopulation, predicting mass starvation, social upheaval, and environmental collapse if population growth was not curtailed. Ehrlich's book became a catalyst for the modern environmental movement, emphasizing the urgent need for population control measures (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Impact on Discussions About Overpopulation and Environmental Sustainability "The Population Bomb" had a profound impact on public discourse and policy regarding population growth and environmental sustainability. It brought the issue of overpopulation to the forefront of environmental and political discussions, influencing policies and sparking debates about reproductive rights, resource allocation, and environmental conservation. Ehrlich's work, though controversial, highlighted the interconnectedness of human population dynamics and environmental health, paving the way for future discussions on sustainable development and ecological balance (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Church of Euthanasia

Founded by Chris Korda The Church of Euthanasia, founded by Chris Korda in 1992, is a religious organization that advocates for population reduction to preserve the Earth's environment. The church's motto, "Save the Planet, Kill Yourself," and its provocative methods have attracted both attention and criticism (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Provocative Methods and Messaging Aimed at Reducing Human Population The Church of Euthanasia employs shocking and controversial tactics to promote its message, including public demonstrations, provocative slogans, and multimedia campaigns. The organization advocates for four main pillars: suicide, abortion, cannibalism (of the already dead), and sodomy (to prevent procreation). While its methods are extreme and often seen as satire, the church aims to provoke thought and discussion about the impact of human overpopulation on the planet (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

John Gray

British Philosopher Critiquing the Sustainability of Human Civilization John Gray is a British philosopher and author known for his critical views on human progress and the sustainability of modern civilization. Gray argues that the belief in perpetual human advancement and technological solutions to environmental problems is flawed and dangerous (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Works and Philosophical Stance on Human Extinction and Environmental Collapse In his books, such as "Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals" and "The Silence of Animals: On Progress and Other Modern Myths,"

Gray challenges the Enlightenment idea of human exceptionalism and progress. He posits that human civilization is inherently unsustainable and that efforts to dominate nature will inevitably lead to ecological collapse. Gray's philosophical stance is often bleak, suggesting that humanity's best hope lies in recognizing its limitations and adopting a more humble and sustainable approach to living within the Earth's ecological constraints (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Conclusion These historical and philosophical perspectives highlight the diverse approaches to understanding and addressing the challenges of human population growth and environmental sustainability. From Paul R. Ehrlich's alarmist warnings to the provocative activism of the Church of Euthanasia and the critical philosophy of John Gray, these thinkers and movements have contributed significantly to the ongoing debate about humanity's future and the health of our planet. Their ideas continue to influence discussions on sustainable development, environmental ethics, and the complex relationship between human society and the natural world.

Modern Advocates and Their Views

Derrick Jensen

Environmental Activist Advocating for the Collapse of Industrial Civilization Derrick Jensen is a prominent environmental activist and author who advocates for the dismantling of industrial civilization to preserve the natural environment. He is known for his radical views and calls for direct action against systems he believes are inherently destructive to the planet.

Major Works and Influence on Radical Environmentalism Jensen's major works include "Endgame" and "A Language Older Than Words," where he articulates his philosophy that industrial civilization is unsustainable and must be actively dismantled to prevent ecological collapse. In "Endgame," Jensen outlines a two-volume manifesto that advocates for the collapse of civilization as a necessary step to save the Earth's ecosystems. His influence extends to the broader radical environmental movement, inspiring activists to consider more aggressive and direct forms of resistance against environmental degradation. Jensen's ideas

challenge mainstream environmentalism by rejecting incremental change in favor of revolutionary action (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Keith Farnish

Author of "Time's Up! An Uncivilized Solution to a Global Crisis" Keith Farnish is an environmental writer and activist whose work focuses on the urgent need to address the ecological crises facing the planet. His book "Time's Up! An Uncivilized Solution to a Global Crisis" presents a critical analysis of modern civilization and its impact on the environment.

Arguments for Dismantling Industrial Civilization In "Time's Up!," Farnish argues that industrial civilization is inherently unsustainable and that the only viable solution is to dismantle it entirely. He advocates for a return to more primitive, localized ways of living that are in harmony with nature. Farnish's arguments are grounded in the belief that technological solutions and incremental reforms are insufficient to address the scale of the ecological crises we face. Instead, he calls for a radical overhaul of societal structures and a rejection of consumer culture to restore ecological balance. His views have influenced a segment of the environmental movement that seeks deeper, systemic changes rather than surface-level fixes (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Guy McPherson

Conservation Biologist Predicting Near-Term Human Extinction Due to Climate Change Guy McPherson is a conservation biologist and professor emeritus of natural resources and ecology who has gained notoriety for his dire predictions regarding climate change. McPherson argues that near-term human extinction is inevitable due to the accelerating impacts of global warming.

Key Arguments and Public Reception of His Views McPherson's central argument is that positive feedback loops in the climate system, such as the release of methane from Arctic permafrost, will lead to runaway climate change that will render the Earth uninhabitable for humans within a few decades. He has detailed these views in his book "Going Dark" and through numerous public lectures and interviews. McPherson's predictions have sparked significant debate and controversy, with some scientists and environmentalists criticizing his views as overly pessimistic and unsupported by mainstream climate science. However, his

message resonates with those who feel that current efforts to combat climate change are too little, too late, and that humanity must prepare for the worst-case scenario (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Conclusion These modern advocates of extinctionist thought, though varying in their approaches and severity of their predictions, share a common concern for the future of the planet and the sustainability of human civilization. By challenging conventional narratives and proposing radical solutions, they contribute to a broader discussion about the urgent need for environmental action and the potential paths humanity might take in response to ecological crises.

Contemporary Environmental Movements

Deep Green Resistance

Radical Environmental Group Advocating for the Dismantling of Industrial Civilization Deep Green Resistance (DGR) is a radical environmental organization founded by Derrick Jensen, Lierre Keith, and Aric McBay. The group advocates for the dismantling of industrial civilization as a necessary step to halt environmental destruction and restore ecological balance.

Goals, Methods, and Key Figures The primary goal of DGR is to stop the ongoing ecological devastation caused by industrial civilization. They argue that industrial society is fundamentally unsustainable and that true environmental sustainability can only be achieved by dismantling its infrastructures. DGR supports a strategy called "Decisive Ecological Warfare," which includes both aboveground and underground actions to disrupt and dismantle the systems they see as responsible for environmental degradation.

Key figures include:

- **Derrick Jensen**: Co-founder and influential author known for his critiques of industrial civilization.
- **Lierre Keith**: Co-founder and author of "The Vegetarian Myth," which challenges mainstream environmentalist and dietary narratives.

- **Aric McBay**: Co-founder and co-author of "Deep Green Resistance: Strategy to Save the Planet," which outlines the group's philosophy and tactics.

DGR operates on the principle that small-scale, reformist efforts are insufficient to address the scale of environmental crises. Instead, they advocate for direct action and civil disobedience to target the infrastructures of industrial civilization. Their methods include public education, advocacy for sustainable living, and supporting direct action initiatives aimed at disrupting industrial activities (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Emergent Movements and Influences

Overview of Recent Movements Influenced by Extinctionist Thought In recent years, various environmental movements and groups have emerged, influenced by extinctionist thought and advocating for radical changes to avert ecological collapse. These movements emphasize the urgency of addressing environmental crises and often adopt more radical approaches than mainstream environmental organizations.

Impact on Public Policy and Environmental Activism The influence of extinctionist and radical environmental thought has led to several notable impacts on public policy and environmental activism:

1. **Extinction Rebellion (XR)**: Founded in the United Kingdom in 2018, XR has quickly become a global movement advocating for radical action to combat climate change. They employ nonviolent civil disobedience to pressure governments to declare a climate emergency and take immediate steps to reduce carbon emissions. XR's tactics, such as mass protests and road blockades, have brought significant media attention to climate issues and influenced public discourse on the urgency of environmental action (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).
2. **School Strike for Climate (Fridays for Future)**: Inspired by Greta Thunberg, this global movement of young people striking from school to demand climate action has gained international prominence. Thunberg's speeches and the widespread participation of young activists have brought a sense of urgency to climate discussions, influencing public opinion and prompting some governments to take stronger climate measures.

3. **Earth First!**: A direct action environmental group that has been influential since the 1980s, Earth First! promotes "eco-defense" and direct action to protect wilderness and ecosystems. Their tactics include protests, tree-sits, and other forms of civil disobedience aimed at stopping environmentally destructive activities.
4. **The Sunrise Movement**: An American youth-led political movement advocating for political action on climate change, specifically the Green New Deal. The Sunrise Movement has been instrumental in bringing climate change to the forefront of U.S. political discussions and has influenced several policymakers to adopt more aggressive climate policies.

These movements, though varying in their methods and specific goals, share a common drive to address the ecological crises facing the planet. Their influence on public policy and environmental activism is significant, as they push for more radical and immediate actions to mitigate the effects of climate change and environmental degradation (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Conclusion Contemporary environmental movements, from Deep Green Resistance to Extinction Rebellion and beyond, represent a spectrum of radical thought aimed at addressing the urgent environmental challenges of our time. These movements challenge the status quo, advocating for profound changes in how society interacts with the natural world. Their influence on public policy and environmental activism underscores the growing recognition of the need for bold action to secure a sustainable future for the planet.

Critiques and Counterarguments

Examination of Critiques Against Extinctionist Views

Critiques of extinctionist views come from various perspectives, including ethical, practical, and scientific standpoints. Critics argue that these views are overly pessimistic, ethically problematic, and often impractical.

1. **Overly Pessimistic and Alarmist**: Critics argue that extinctionist views are overly alarmist, presenting a doomsday scenario that may not be supported by the full spectrum of scientific evidence. They claim that while the

environmental crisis is severe, it does not necessarily require such extreme measures as the complete cessation of human reproduction or the dismantling of civilization (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

2. **Ethical Concerns**: Ethically, extinctionist views are challenged for promoting ideas that could be seen as misanthropic and devaluing human life. Critics argue that advocating for human extinction or significant population reduction disregards the inherent value of human existence and the potential for humanity to adapt and solve its problems through innovation and cooperation (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

3. **Impractical Solutions**: Practically, critics argue that the solutions proposed by extinctionists are often unrealistic and unfeasible. For example, the voluntary cessation of human reproduction or the dismantling of industrial civilization are seen as extreme measures that are unlikely to gain widespread acceptance or implementation. Additionally, such measures could lead to significant social and economic disruptions, with potentially disastrous consequences for human well-being (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Ethical and Practical Counterarguments

1. **Value of Human Life and Potential**: Ethical counterarguments emphasize the intrinsic value of human life and the moral responsibility to seek solutions that preserve human dignity and well-being. They argue that it is unethical to promote human extinction or severe population reduction as these ideas undermine the importance of human creativity, resilience, and potential for positive change (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

2. **Technological and Social Innovations**: Practical counterarguments highlight the potential for technological and social innovations to address environmental challenges. Advances in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and conservation technologies offer promising solutions that do not require extreme measures like the dismantling of industrial civilization. Additionally, social changes such as shifts in consumption patterns, improved education, and policies promoting sustainable development can significantly mitigate environmental impacts without resorting to drastic population control measures (Meaww) (The Daily Beast)
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3. **Adaptation and Resilience**: Humans have demonstrated remarkable adaptability and resilience in the face of challenges throughout history. Critics of extinctionist views argue that fostering these qualities through education, collaboration, and innovation is a more ethical and practical approach. Encouraging responsible stewardship of the environment and promoting sustainable practices can lead to meaningful change without the need for extreme population control measures (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Potential Alternatives to Extinctionist Approaches

1. **Sustainable Development**: Promoting sustainable development is a key alternative to extinctionist approaches. This involves balancing economic growth, environmental protection, and social equity. Policies that encourage sustainable practices, such as reducing carbon emissions, protecting biodiversity, and promoting green technologies, can help address environmental challenges without compromising human development (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).
2. **Population Stabilization Through Education and Empowerment**: Rather than advocating for the cessation of human reproduction, efforts can be directed towards stabilizing the population through education and empowerment. Access to education, especially for women, and family planning services can help manage population growth in a way that is ethical and respects individual rights (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).
3. **Technological Innovation**: Investing in technological innovation to develop cleaner energy sources, improve resource efficiency, and create sustainable agricultural practices can provide solutions to environmental problems without necessitating radical societal changes. Technologies such as solar power, electric vehicles, and precision agriculture hold promise for reducing humanity's environmental footprint (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).
4. **Conservation and Restoration**: Efforts to conserve and restore natural ecosystems can play a significant role in addressing environmental challenges. Initiatives to protect endangered species, restore degraded habitats, and manage natural resources sustainably are crucial for maintaining biodiversity and ecological health (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

5. **International Cooperation and Policy**: Global environmental challenges require coordinated international efforts. Strengthening international agreements and cooperation on issues such as climate change, pollution, and resource management can lead to more effective and comprehensive solutions. Policies that support environmental protection and sustainable development on a global scale are essential for addressing the interconnected nature of these issues (Meaww) (The Daily Beast).

Conclusion

While extinctionist views bring attention to the severity of environmental crises, they are often critiqued for their extreme measures and ethical implications. More balanced approaches that leverage human ingenuity, technological advancements, and sustainable practices offer viable alternatives. By fostering international cooperation, promoting sustainable development, and empowering individuals through education, humanity can address environmental challenges in a way that values both the planet and human life.

Conclusion

Summary of Key Points Discussed in the Article

This article has delved into the concept of extinctionist thought, examining its various proponents and movements, from Elon Musk's controversial accusation against Kamala Harris to historical and modern advocates. We've explored the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT), led by Les Knight, which promotes the voluntary cessation of human reproduction to protect the planet. Philosophers like David Benatar and ecologists such as Pentti Linkola have offered radical perspectives on population control and environmental preservation. Additionally, we've examined the influence of thinkers like Paul R. Ehrlich, the provocative methods of the Church of Euthanasia, and the critical views of John Gray. Modern advocates like Derrick Jensen, Keith Farnish, and Guy McPherson further underscore the urgency and radical approaches within extinctionist thought. We also highlighted contemporary movements like Deep Green Resistance and the broader impact of these ideologies on public policy and environmental activism.

Reflection on the Implications of Extinctionist Thought for the Future

The rise of extinctionist thought reflects a growing sense of urgency and desperation among certain environmentalists and philosophers regarding the state of the planet. These ideas challenge conventional environmental strategies and call for more drastic measures to address ecological crises. The implications of adopting extinctionist perspectives are profound, suggesting a fundamental rethinking of humanity's role on Earth and the ethical responsibilities we bear towards future generations and the natural world. While these views can spur important discussions and highlight the severity of environmental issues, they also raise ethical and practical concerns that must be carefully considered.

Final Thoughts on the Balance Between Environmental Preservation and Human Sustainability

Striking a balance between environmental preservation and human sustainability is crucial. While extinctionist thought pushes the boundaries of this debate, it also underscores the need for innovative, ethical, and practical solutions to environmental challenges. Sustainable development, technological innovation, and international cooperation offer pathways to address ecological issues without resorting to extreme measures. Empowering individuals through education and promoting responsible stewardship of the environment are essential steps towards a sustainable future. Ultimately, the goal should be to foster a harmonious coexistence between humanity and the natural world, ensuring the health and well-being of both.

By understanding and critically examining the diverse perspectives within extinctionist thought, we can better navigate the complexities of environmental ethics and develop holistic strategies that prioritize both ecological sustainability and human flourishing.

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